

THE ABUNDANCE ATTRACTION
The Rev. Julie Stoneberg
Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough
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OPENING WORDS

Raspberry ~ Rev. Dr. Lynn Ungar

Almost October, and there it was,
draped over the fence,
ripe as July, and as seductive —
a stranger's bit of paradise.
It wasn't mine. Perhaps
I should have left it there,
flashing like a cardinal
in the autumn light.
But, still, the world offers itself so lavishly, as if
it will not be refused.
Sometimes I call this "grace."
Sometimes I simply taste it
as a perfect raspberry, out of season,
savored seed by seed,
Persephone's fruit.

STORY FOR ALL

More

~ I.C. Springman

(Tells the story of a magpie who collects so many things for its nest that the branch breaks, and then with help, is able to have just enough.)

READING

Gratitude is Not Enough

~ Elizabeth Tarbox

The world is full of blessings: I have a home, a family, good fortune, good health. I have a job, a wonderful church family, and people whom I admire and respect to share my work.

I have a place to go with my weight of disappointment and water to bathe my hurts. I have the vision of sunrise over the ocean every day, and gulls whose voices chorus my song, a choir of chanting whenever I want it. I have memories.

I have a heart for breaking, and a melting fire in my blood to fracture my sanity and cause me to lie down on the floor and cry to see children hungry, children dealing drugs, and children watching violence on television and in their homes. I have a pillow to catch my tears, voiceless trees to monitor my coming and going, and the wind to sing the requiem.

I have politicians in white shirts and striped ties to keep guns in the hands of boys in blue jeans and t-shirts. I have drug lords in Cadillacs to keep crack babies in slums. I have poetry and ocean to remind me of the Goddess and the Goddess to remind me of

AIDS and prejudice.

Well, I refuse to lie down and be good. I will not heal up neatly, sutures in a row, no scars. No, I will not. I will shout out that I am here and hurting and I will demand of life that it return my shout decibel for decibel. I will speak of justice and kindness and beauty and truth, and I will try bravery though I am a coward, and I will honor wisdom though I am a fool.

I will find other broken people with divinity shining through their pain, to remind me that the human spirit is hard to defeat, that the world is young yet and we are just an idea; that love is not for ever, but a little love once in a while is worth the risk of keeping the door of our hearts wide open. And I look for goodness and know it when I see it, and I see it in you and your children and your dreams. And I can never be grateful enough.

MESSAGE *The Abundance Attraction* ~ Rev. Stoneberg

I better state right up front that, as a concept, I am quite ambivalent about abundance. I say this hesitantly because I know that for at least some of you, perhaps many of you, abundance is an important awareness in your life. But I must also admit, that in spite of my ambivalence, my suspect nature, I am not unaware of the abundance that exists in my life, for truly it does.

One of the abundances in my life is the many 'gifts', shall we say, that are visited upon me as I prepare for a particular sermon or theme. Without fail, content just shows up. This week, that abundance came to me during a lunch conversation, when two present started talking about a book they are reading...*In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts: Close Encounters with Addiction*, by Gabor Maté. More abundant was its availability as an ebook from the library; I was able to get it into my hands quickly. But what, you might ask, does a book on addiction have to do with abundance? Well, as we progress, I hope you'll see.

In his introduction, Maté, who does medical work with addicts in Vancouver's downtown east side and is an addict himself, talks about the *mandala*. This Buddhist Wheel of Life revolves through six realms, each representing a different aspect of human existence. The Beast realm is where we are driven by physical appetites, the Hell realm is where we are trapped in rage or anxiety, the God realm is about religious experience, etc. The Hungry Ghost realm, says Maté, is "the domain of addiction, where we constantly seek something outside ourselves to curb an insatiable yearning for relief or fulfillment."¹ (I'm going to be quoting Maté frequently this morning.)

As far back as Shakespeare, addiction referred simply to an activity one might be passionate about, and it wasn't until the 20th century that it took on the pathological meaning it has today. In our time, addiction is considered to be an unhealthy dependence, even an illness, characterized by an impaired ability to control one's cravings, and an addict is someone who is compelled to persist in getting their cravings met regardless of the negative impact it has on their life or the lives of others.² (There are many nuances to addiction and I know that I have

¹ P. 10-11

² P. 77

already run the risk of over-simplifying.)

Still, “Incompleteness,” writes Maté, “is the baseline state of the addict. The addict believes – either with full awareness or unconsciously – that he is ‘not enough.’ ...He must escape the painful experience of the void within through any activity that fills...”³

The final chapter of *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts* is about the spiritual quest. Maté writes, “Addiction floods in where self-knowledge – and therefore divine knowledge – are missing. To fill the unendurable void, we become attached to things of the world that cannot possibly compensate us for the loss of who we are.”⁴ And what is that void? What is the loss we experience? The essential self...that essence that contains the source of our creative power, our strength, our unique voice, our well-being.

Joseph Campbell, the late seminal mythologist, wrote and spoke prolifically about the hero’s journey, that quest or adventure for the spiritual truth within. The reward at the end of the journey, he said, was “to realize that one is that essence” and to see furthermore, that “the world too is of that essence. The essence of oneself and the essence of the world: these two are one.”⁵

Now, Maté suggests that while infants come into the world fully present and open, they soon begin to shut down those parts of themselves that they sense are not being accepted. And, as they shut down, essential qualities...like love, joy, strength, courage...are suppressed. In the place of these qualities...the infant, the child, the adult (us)...experiences a hole...a loss of essence...which is felt as a deficiency that becomes a part of our identity. In other words, we think we are that hole, we are that deficiency, that something is wrong with us, and we proceed to develop ways to cover up the emptiness.⁶

Are you connecting the dots between addiction and abundance yet? Let’s return to my ambivalence. I feel that our society’s focus on abundance and attracting it into our lives (through abundance pundits such as Oprah Winfrey, Rhonda Byrne, Wayne Dyer, etc.) too often is used as a panacea for the holes we feel in our personal self-worth, and as such serves to make us addicts...addicted to more, more, more.

And it doesn’t help matters that a prevalent modern theology would have us believe that if we have wealth, and enough to eat, and a nice place to live, etc, it means that we have somehow deserved it...that we have found favour in the eyes of God.⁷ The 19th century preacher Russell Conwell spread wide a message that it is our duty to get rich, because the richest are the most honest, and because we ought to have power. His famous lecture, “Acres of Diamonds,” claimed that it is our godly duty to attain unto riches, and that it is wrong to be poor.⁸

That same theology is used today by the mega-church pastor Joel Osteen who preaches that

³ P. 185

⁴ P. 213

⁵ P. 215, quoting Joseph Campbell in “The Hero with a Thousand Faces”

⁶ P. 215, referring to the work of A.H.Almaas

⁷⁷ Rev. Hilary Landau Krivchenia www.questformeaning.org/quest-article/finding-abundance/

⁸ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/rconwellacresofdiamonds.htm>

God is a god of 'more than enough' who doesn't want you to barely get by.⁹ I can only imagine how this message reads to those who do not have enough...as it must seem that God does not love them, or at the very least, pays them no mind, which only makes the hole inside larger.

Abundance is also a concept that has been instrumental in our pillaging of the earth. When the planet's resources are seen as an abundance to which we should 'help ourselves,' we have taken more than our share, without regard to 'giving back' to replenish or protect those resources. Often that pillaging has been done in the name of economic growth, which is, paradoxically, something that is rooted in feelings of scarcity...that is, a sense that one must accumulate more and more to defend oneself against any lack. And so, sometimes celebrating abundance is really a celebration of greed and fear and selfishness.

(As an aside, these thoughts contribute to my theories about the popularity of Donald Trump. I am praying for my fellow-Americans, and for our world, in these days.)

And just one more warning about abundance, and then I promise to be more affirming of it. It seems to me that the advice to simply switch one's attitude from scarcity to abundance is far too glib. It is completely inappropriate to say to those who are poor, oppressed, depressed, anxious, or addicted, that they just need to turn on their abundance mentality. It's all well and good to talk about spiritual and emotional abundance, but doing spiritual work in no way guarantees material wealth. And unfortunately, the quality of our material lives continues to be the undeniable measure of our worth.

There. Now I've expressed my ambivalence about abundance. I'm truly not ambivalent about abundance itself, but rather about the ways it has been twisted into a kind of lure or temptation or reward that mostly serves to make us feel more empty and fundamentally lacking. Abundance has unfortunately been used like a drug, promising to give us a quick fix, a high, of feeling blessed or full.

And yet...all that said...there is also something incredibly healing about tuning into the abundance that exists around us, and in us. It just feels good, abundance does. And it should. So how are we to experience true abundance?

Well, did you notice that we've already sung two songs about being thankful, and that Ruth also shared a reading about gratitude? Many studies show the benefit of gratitude in the treatment of both depression and addiction. Gratitude boosts happiness and alleviates depression by shifting thinking from negative outcomes to positive ones, which elicits a surge of feel-good hormones like dopamine, serotonin and oxytocin. Gratitude also builds enduring personal connections, which are very important in the experience of abundance. It turns out that, rather than reserving our thanks for those times when we have more than enough, offering gratitude opens us up to an awareness of abundance that already exists.

You know about the twelve steps, right, and how one of those steps is to connect with a higher power? I don't think that higher power has to be a god; it is anything larger or beyond

⁹ <https://www.joelosteen.com/Pages/Blog.aspx?blogid=9234>

oneself...meaning...purpose...the other. It's been found that the brain area that lights up when we extend ourselves and do kindnesses to one another is in the posterior superior temporal cortex, whose function includes being aware of others. We don't practice kindness because it gives us a selfish high; in fact, altruism has no effect on the brain circuitry that gives us pleasure.¹⁰ So, this is actually hardwired into our brains...our human need to practice compassion and to do good works. Being kind connects us to others...something beyond ourselves...which remember is also imbedded in that hero's journey to the center of our being where we find meaning beyond ourselves.

Another way, a deeper way, to state this is that our personal experience of abundance correlates with the openness of our hearts.¹¹ To live with an open heart is much more than a glib switch in attitude. It is more than some quick fix. It is fundamental choice to live in a certain way as a human being in relationship with others, and with all that is.

Not quite the path one might expect to abundance, right? Rather than accumulating, we offer gratitude for what we have. Instead of stockpiling, we give something away. Rather than flipping a switch in our minds, we open our hearts as fully as possible. To be a community of abundance, we choose to fully participate in a grand cycle of giving and receiving, taking and replacing, tending to and being tended to. It is in this way that we assure that there is abundance present for all.

We are so privileged...and I say that with full acknowledgement that there is a wide spectrum of having and not having present in this room. We are so privileged. And what is amazing is that even amidst all of this abundance, within these walls and without, there are so so many people who are hungry for a way to feel full, to feel satisfied with their lives, to feel that they have enough. It is no coincidence, at least in my mind, that as society has grown more and more materialistic, there has been an inversely proportional decrease in religious participation. And I am heartened by the more recent and increasing interest in spirituality. I see this as an expression of the longing, the hunger, that exists in so many of us.

So perhaps what is most relevant for us now is a question about what we as a faith tradition, and as a religious community, can offer in response to that longing.

I believe that in our insistence on the inherent worth of each person, and in our dogged striving to welcome all, this community can fill in some of the psycho-spiritual holes that have been created in each of us whenever/wherever we have experienced a lack of acceptance. Loving one another, across all ages, across all differences, is to aid one another on our heroes' journeys to return to our essence, that place where we discover that we are all one, and that we are loved as we are.

I also believe that we can continue to create and provide a culture of gratitude that acts as a healing balm. Being grateful, if only for that one last luscious raspberry on the vine, is a spiritual practice that we can promote and live.

I believe that we can offer each other, in community, all kinds of ways to be generous and

¹⁰ P. 216

¹¹ <http://revjoshpawelek.org/pope-francis-inverted-funnels-and-big-hearts-open/>

giving. There are endless opportunities, whenever in the presence of others, to share and connect. Generosity is a beautiful expression of community, and the special task of a spiritual community.

I believe that we can be a laboratory for experimenting with stretching open our hearts as just wide as possible. Our history, our tradition, has been particularly good at opening minds, and pretty good at opening hands. Perhaps fully opening our hearts is our next great task. Together.

Maté says that both spiritual work and psychological work are necessary to fill our emptiness and to reclaim our true natures,¹² and that healing occurs in a sacred place located within us all.¹³ May such healing...this filling in of those holes which try to tell us that we are not enough...be the work of this sacred place, this community of abundance...that each of us may experience life, and a life more abundant.

So may it be.

***CLOSING WORDS**

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~ Barbara J. Pescan

May the glory of the passing away of autumn
lie about us
fresh gold
for a time.

And when the dark comes, and the cold
may we remember how today we stand in glory,
how we walk in bounty
heaped upon earth's dark carpet,
how we move knee deep in abundance
flung against night's winter curtain.

We are thankful for its coming
and for its passing.

Let it be.

Amen. Blessed be.

EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME

¹² P. 216

¹³ P. 217